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ABSTRACT

The importance of collaboration between professional research and professional personnel in the classroom and school office is described, and suggestions are made for overcoming barriers to effective collaboration. Crandall's conditions for effective collaboration are: that the participants possess substantive competency; that both organizations function effectively with clear lines of communication and a minimum of red tape; and that participants possess collaborative competency and a commitment to the task at hand. Suggestions for overcoming barriers include: (1) make data collection profitable to the school districts that collect the data; (2) respect the local districts' way of doing things; (3) use familiar language or define clearly the terms you use; (4) take the time necessary to comply with the Privacy Act; and (5) do not waste peoples' time with poor quality research. (Author/CTM)

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OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO SCHOOL BASED RESEARCH: A LOCAL SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE

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It was Machievilli who said, "There is nothing more dangerous to carry out, nor difficult to handle, than to bring about a new order to things." But Francis Bacon said, as if in reply, "He who will not accept the hazardous necessity for change must accept new evils--for time is the greatest innovator."

America's public schools are now experiencing a crisis in public confidence of major proportion--a crisis fashioned by unfullfilled dreams and promises of "educational programs to meet the needs of every student." These promises and dreams have come at a time in history when the composition of schools has become more diverse--when the traditionally strong parental support of schools is reportedly diminishing--when many of the values traditionally held by the young to respect authority and adults are on the wane. The challenges are unparalleled in educational history. Yet the tax payer is demanding educational programs that are more effective and more cost efficient than ever before. In a nutshell, the educational scene is wrought with problems. And where there are problems, there is fertile ground for research.

The educational practitioner in the classroom and in the office have a vital role and an obligation to engage in research as a means of solving educational problems. Generally, however, school practitioners are drained as a result of the day-to-day operational problems of the schools. Nor is there always the time and expertise at the local level to digest and apply the growing body of knowledge that professional researchers are generating. Consequently, practitioners do not conduct or apply a great deal of educational research.

Professional researchers, on the other hand, are anxious to conduct research. They have a primary goal to extend knowledge in the field of

education through scientific inquiry. And this research needs to take place in the classroom in many instances. The literature is abundant with statements that proclaim the virtues of conducting educational research in its natural environment, which means conducting research in the classroom. As the sub-topics of this symposium indicate, however, access to the natural setting of the classroom is not always readily available to the researcher. And when research has been done, the impact on educational practice is often minimal. It is obvious that educational researchers and practitioners have complementary concerns and needs. If we are to address our complementary concerns, it is imperative that we work together. We must collaborate in the true sense of the word and on every front.

I do not mean to imply that there is no collaboration taking place between university researchers and school-based educators. We can all cite examples of successful cooperative research projects. But if we are to solve the educational problems facing us today, a great deal more collaboration is necessary.

I would like to address some ways to "bridge the gap" between the people who normally conduct the research (the professional researchers) and the people who have the problems to be researched and who desperately need to utilize educational research results--the school community.

First, let us look at those barriers that impede university researchers and school personnel from collaborating successfully. Let us look at these barriers from the vantage point of the local school practitioner. The first barrier is what I call the "data collection overload." We in public education are inundated with <u>required</u> data collection. We have our own operationalized goals which must be monitored through district-wide testing,

interviewing, surveys and classroom observations. In addition, this age of accountability has caused increased federal and state data collection at the local level. Teachers, principals and administrators tend to resist any unrequired, additional data collection efforts.

The second barrier is the stereotyped image that many school personnel have of university "professors." From the practitioner's point of view, researchers are seen as "inhabitants of the ivory tower." The practitioner often resists what he/she views as idealistic theories when what he/she wants is practical, quick solutions to the immediate problem at hand.

The third barrier is the communications gap which exists between university researchers and school personnel. Researchers and educators tend to speak different languages. Therefore, they have a problem communicating. Many school staffs are not knowledgeable about basic, essential research terminology. Fortunately, this situation is changing as more teachers and administrators pursue advanced study. Many researchers overdo "educationese" to the extent of not being coherent even to other researchers, much less to the day-to-day practitioner. Let us remember that most jargon, while adding to the language, does little to improve it.

The fourth barrier is the constraints imposed by the Privacy Act. The Privacy Act makes it more difficult for school systems to make student records available to researchers. But research studies often require confidential data such as I.Q. scores, psychological records, medical reports and social histories. Appropriate time-consuming procedures must be followed to obtain these data.

Negative attitudes toward research projects is the fifth barrier. Years of experience with universities have caused local school administrators a d teachers to be leery of research projects because of previous problems. These problems include research projects that do not address the needs of

the school or school system, poor quality research designs, poorly implemented projects, failure to report back to the school system as promised, and a lack of concern for school system policy and/or formalized procedures.

I could continue identifying barriers to university/school-based cooperative research. However, a more productive expenditure of time is the identification of ways to overcome these barriers. They are not insurmountable.

There has been a great deal written about organizational development theories in recent years from which to draw strategies for implementing collaboration. As the scientific component in the field of education, you will feel comfortable with a theoretical approach to developing collaborative research relationships. While reviewing the literature for a theoretical model, I tested each model in a purely subjective way by balancing it against my personal experience. One model which passes this very subjective test is David Crandall's "conditions for effective collaboration."

Crandall presents three such conditions in a 1977 edition of The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science. The first condition is substantive competency. This means that the players must have competency related to the problem at hand. There must be no doubt on the part of school administrators and teachers that the researcher possesses substantive competency. The researcher must demonstrate that she/he knows what she/he is about. And, as I have mentioned before, school based personnel are in better positions than ever before to judge researchers' competencies. You must not only know research methodology, it helps if someone on the university research team is aware of the reality constraints and opportunities of public schools. Likewise, it facilitates the collaborative effort if local school people have a general background in educational research methods and techniques. It helps if they possess the abilities to identify and describe educational problems. With

the need for substantive competency in mind, you as researchers must decide with which school systems you can most effectively collaborate. The logical question to raise is, "Should researchers select those school systems that lack research expertise and are thus in the greatest need of assistance or those school systems that have some internal research skills and, therefore, offer the greatest potential for successful collaborative efforts?" This is a question that only the individual research unit can answer.

The second condition that Crandall offers as a collaborative theoretical base is that organizational norm/sanctions must support collaborative efforts. Each of the collaborating organizations must have a structure that functions with clear lines of communication and a minimum of "red tape." Each organization must sanction or support the collaboration from the top down.

The third, and most important condition, is collaborative competency. Collaborative competency is defined by Crandall as those attitudes and skills necessary to engage in collaboration. One attitude related to collaborative competency is a commitment to the task at hand and its relationship to the organizational mission. There are a few simple ways that commitment can be obtained. First, university researchers should involve the school district at the outset in the conceptualization of research proposals rather than requesting a letter of endorsement as an after thought. Secondly, problems should be identified based on the school district's needs (from the school district's perception) rather than <u>for</u> the school district. A commitment to the school system involved and concern for its uniqueness is another collaborative attitudinal phenomenon. The university researcher needs to realize that every school system is "a new ball game." What was done last year in District X is not necessarily the way that it can be done in District Y. The researcher needs to communicate and demonstrate that the job will be finished once it is started and that there is an understanding that the school

personnel's first job is to keep the schools running. School administrators have a responsibility to protect teachers' and students' time so that learning can go on.

The researcher must develop skills in the optimum use of self and others as resources. Freda Holley, in a paper entitled "The Public School's R and E Unit Looks at Researchers and School District Needs," describes specific strategies worked out by Austin, Texas' Research and Evaluation unit to maintain good relationships. Holley advocates treating the school staff as collaborators with due respect. One certainly promotes the optimal use of others when one treats others as equal, respected partners. Holley also recommends that data collectors be trained in appropriate school behaviors so that respect for the collaborating organization is evident in all of the staff. Cutoff "jeans" may be appropriate for the college computer center, but may be frowned upon in the public school classroom. She further suggests that researchers report personally the outcomes of the study to teachers, and provide the central office with copies of published reports as well as raw data where such data may be useful. It is extremely important, says Holley, that researchers carry on high quality research. This is the bottom line for earning respect and facilitating collaboration.

Let me relate my remarks to the five barriers that I cited previously:

1. Data Collection Overload

   Make data collection profitable for local school districts by focusing on areas that are preceived to be problems by the local district.

2. Stereotyped Image of the University Researcher

   Researchers must possess what Crandall calls collaborative competency--competency which considers

the local district's organizational mission and respects the local district's way of doing things.

3. The Communications Gap

Make sure you use familiar words when communicating with school practitioners. If you must use technical terms, define them clearly.

4. The Privacy Act

As you know, research projects that required confidential data necessitate written permission from each subject or the subject's parent or guardian. The procedures to obtain permission should be started in ample time. There are no short cuts. Be empathetic with the school district's needs in this regard.

5. Negative Attitude Toward Research Projects

Conduct quality research. Demonstrate substantive competency, not only in the area of research methodology, but in the area of public school organization and operation as well. Organizational norm/sanctions must support the project in both organizations.

I have cited barriers to collaborative research from the local practitioner's perspective. I hope I have also made it crystal clear that local school districts need university researchers, as you need us. The cooperative efforts of university-based researchers and school-based practitioners will result in better problem definition, easier translation of hypotheses into action and quicker assimilation of research findings into practice than could be accomplished by either the university professor or the local school practitioner alone. Making research collabora-

tive introduces a host of problems. However, if we are to have strong commitments to changed behavior, if we are to attack the real problems confronting education, if we are to transform the wealth of findings that have been generated from scientific study to the level of application, and if we are to renew the public's confidence in education, then we must collaborate. We must accept the hazardous necessity for change.

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